

# Frank Norris Studies

An Annual Publication of the Frank Norris Society

© 2004, The Frank Norris Society

## A Tale of Two Municipalities O. Henry Responds to Norris's "The House with the Blinds"

Eric Carl Link

North Georgia College & State University

In the 1910s and 1920s, William Sydney Porter, better known to most of the reading world as O. Henry, was highly regarded as one of the greatest short story writers ever produced in this country. I think I may suggest without too much risk of offense that Porter's reputation has settled a tad since those first few years after his death in 1910. But, whatever circle of hell we might consign Porter to today, there is little doubt that he deserves more than just a brief mention in any history of the development of the short story in America. Can the same be said about our own Frank Norris? Probably not. At least, no one to the best of my knowledge has successfully made the case that Norris's short fiction warrants such acclaim. Personally, I like many of Norris's short stories, but I'll venture to suggest that my liking them doesn't signify much in the grand scheme of things. Still, even if Norris takes a back seat to Porter as a short story writer, and both take a back seat to Hemingway and O'Connor, Norris has something Porter doesn't: a couple of truly great novels, and several other novels worth reading and discussing. To be fair, Porter didn't write *A Man's Woman*, either, which probably stands to his credit.

Is it ironic, therefore, to suggest that one of Porter's main influences in his own development as a writer of short stories was Frank Norris? Fred Lewis Pattee, in his 1966 study *The Development of the American Short Story*, makes this very suggestion. Pattee suggests that Porter's "first master seems to have been Frank Norris, whose parodies and striking sketches were appearing in the *San Francisco Wave* and other magazines. The 'gentle grafter' brand of 'tall talk,' for instance, impossible on any human lips save on the vaudeville stage,

is identical in the two writers."<sup>1</sup>

Aside from the similarities in voice that Pattee notes in his history, there is at least one case in which a connection between Porter and Norris can be directly seen. One of Porter's last, and best, short stories was first published in 1909 and was incorporated into Porter's final collection, *Strictly Business*, which appeared in 1910, the year of Porter's death. The story, entitled "A Municipal Report," begins with two epigraphs, one from Kipling, and one from Frank Norris. The Norris epigraph is a quote from Norris's story "The House with the Blinds" which had appeared in *The Wave* in August 1897 and was later collected in *The Third Circle*. The epigraph reads: "Fancy a novel about Chicago or Buffalo, let us say, or Nashville, Tennessee! There are just three big cities in the United States that are 'story cities'—New York, of course, New Orleans, and, best of the lot, San Francisco."<sup>2</sup> Porter takes this claim by Norris as a challenge of sorts, and proceeds to offer rebuttal by crafting a story set in Nashville. Porter's story can be summarized like this: a first person narrator traveling on business of his own is hired by a northern literary magazine to stop in Nashville in order to establish a direct relationship between the magazine and one of its prized contributors, an aging and frail southern woman named Azalea Adair. Azalea is poor, living in a decayed southern mansion, and suffers at the hand of her husband, Major Wentworth Caswell, the villain of the story, who pays for his endless bar tab with Azalea's meager earnings from writing. Azalea's only true friend is an emancipated slave named Uncle Caesar, who at one time was the property of the Caswell family, but now hustles for fare as a hack driver, and shares these small earnings with Azalea. It is the only charity Azalea will accept, and, unfortunately, even this charity is taken by Major Caswell and spent in reckless carousing. As the story reaches its climax, Major Caswell is murdered, and the narrator disposes of the key piece of evidence (a tell-tale button lost by the perpetrator during the commission of the crime) that

could have implicated the murderer, Uncle Caesar.

As the epigraph indicates, this story of southern intrigue and murder was conceived of, at least in part, as a direct response to Norris's claim that Nashville, and, indeed, most of America, was not fertile ground for the short story writer. This claim by Norris appears in the opening paragraph of "The House with the Blinds," which reads as follows:

It is a thing said and signed and implicitly believed in by the discerning few that this San Francisco of ours is a place wherein Things can happen. There are some cities like this—cities that have come to be picturesque—that offer opportunities in the matter of background and local color, and are full of stories and dramas and novels, written and unwritten. There seems to be no adequate explanation for this state of things, but you can't go about the streets anywhere within a mile radius of Lotta's fountain without realizing the peculiarity, just as you would realize the hopelessness of making anything out of Chicago, fancy a novel about Chicago! or Buffalo, let us say, or Nashville, Tennessee. There are just three big cities in the United States that are "story cities"—New York, of course, New Orleans, and best of the lot, San Francisco.<sup>3</sup>

The story that follows this bold introductory claim makes an interesting counterpoint to Porter's later story. In "The House with the Blinds," an unnamed narrator, in the midst of making last-minute preparations for setting sail aboard a full-rigged wheat ship, is stopped on the street by a drunk, disheveled, and bruised nurse-maid with wailing infant in tow. The woman accuses the narrator of being a gentleman and insists that he do his gentlemanly duty and go fight someone who had maltreated her, and, besides, could the narrator provide her with four-bits regardless? The narrator obliges with the four-bits, upon which the woman confesses that she lives in yonder "house with the blinds." The narrator, out of a reluctant sense of duty, decides he must approach the house and inform against the inebriated nurse-maid, for the sake of the infant, if nothing else. As he approaches the house, however, he witnesses a squad of policemen enter the house with some determination. As he watches the raid, he sees a hand reach out of a second-floor window and grasp a gilt

Indian-club, and drawing it inside. The shutters and window are then slammed shut. A few minutes later, the policemen emerge from the house carrying six obscenely intoxicated men. These six are loaded onto hacks (the narrator careful to note the strange absence of the patrol-wagon) and the hacks disappear down the street. The incident seems closed, but the next day the narrator is at the docks when he overhears a woman relating details of the incident to eager listeners. It seems that the house was a den for gambling and that in a closet under the stairs the police discovered the body of a man who had been cruelly knifed to death. Beyond a doubt, one of the six inebriates has committed the foul murder, but because they were all so intoxicated none of them can remember who did it or why. When the narrator returns from his voyage aboard the wheat ship a year later he discovers that the six drunks had been released for want of evidence, and that the mystery of the murder was never solved. Thus ends the story, with several questions left unanswered: who committed the murder? Whose hand reached for the Indian-club and why? Why did the nurse-maid claim she lived in the house in the first place?

I wish I could demonstrate unequivocally that O. Henry had read "The House with the Blinds," for the stories have some very provocative parallels that beg for comparison: both feature central mysteries, both feature houses with dark secrets, both concern a murder that goes unpunished, both are told from the point of view of unnamed first-person narrators who are introduced to a mystery as they engage in travel on personal business, both feature off-stage activities that directly affect the "story" within the story, and both begin with a couple of paragraphs that discuss the relative paucity of "story cities" in America (albeit taking contrary views on the topic). Unfortunately, it seems likely that Porter came across the Norris passage that he quotes as his epigraph not through reading "The House with the Blinds" but through reading a review of Norris's *The Third Circle* that had been published in *Putnam's Magazine* in August 1909.<sup>4</sup> This review quotes the two opening paragraphs of "The House with the Blinds," including the particular sentence Porter gravitated to for his epigraph. Sometime in late 1909, Porter—busy drafting the story that would become "A Municipal Report"—composed a letter to the then managing editor of *Hampton's Magazine*, William

Griffith. In this letter he summarizes the main plot of the story and discusses his intentions. He writes:

The whole scheme is to show that an absolutely prosaic and conventional town (such as Nashville) can equal San Francisco, Bagdad [*sic*] or Paris when it comes to a human story.

The beginning of the story is not yet written—there will be 2 or 3 pages (to follow) containing references to Frank Norris's lines in which the words occur—"Think of anything happening in Nashville, Tennessee!" I have to look this up in *Putnam's Magazine*.<sup>5</sup>

Certainly, if Pattee is correct when he suggests that Norris's *Wave* stories were an early influence on Porter, then it is perfectly reasonable to imagine that Porter would have read "The House with the Blinds" when it first appeared in 1897, but the letter Porter wrote to Griffith indicated that at the time he was composing "A Municipal Report" he likely had only the initial excerpt of the story that had been quoted in the *Putnam's* review in mind, not the whole story.

And yet, as a response to Norris, "A Municipal Report" goes further than simply offering up a "story" based in Nashville as a type of rebuttal to Norris's somewhat reckless claim that Nashville is not a story city. Porter's narrator in the first half of the story is the living embodiment of Norris's claim. He is connected with the editorial operations of a literary magazine—as Norris was—and enters Nashville with low expectations, convinced that nothing of much note likely occurs in such a sleepy town. A conversation he has with Azalea offers a contrary perspective, however. Porter writes:

"Your town," I said, as I began to make ready to depart (which is the time for smooth generalities) "seems to be a quiet, sedate place. A home town, I should say, where few things out of the ordinary ever happen."

\* \* \*

Azalea Adair seemed to reflect.

"I have never thought of it that way," she said, with a kind of sincere intensity that seemed to belong to her. "Isn't it in the still, quiet places that things do happen? . . ."

"Of course," said I, plitudinously, "human nature is the same everywhere; but there is more

color—er—more drama and movement and—er—romance in some cities than in others."

"On the surface," said Azalea Adair. (206)

The implications are clear, and they set the tone for many readings of the story: Porter takes a broad, inclusive position in opposition to the narrow or exclusionary perspective of Norris. There is "romance" underlying all of surface reality; it merely takes some integration into the community to see it. To an outsider, Nashville does not seem to hold promising material for the short story writer interested in human drama, but the dramatic material that feeds the pens of short story writers can be found within the depths of all human interaction. The narrator of "A Municipal Report" moves from the bald, dry facts of the almanac to the startling discovery of murder, intrigue and humans struggling with nobility within decay. In his biography of Porter, C. Alphonso Smith puts it this way: "A Municipal Report" is "O. Henry's most powerful presentation of his conviction that to the seeing eye all cities are story cities. It is the appeal of an interpretative genius from statistics to life, from the husks of a municipality as gathered by Rand and McNally to the heart of a city as seen by an artist."<sup>6</sup>

It is difficult to argue with Porter's point, and on the surface Norris's claim might strike us as naïve in comparison. In fact, it would be tempting to assert at this point that Norris's claim was a bit of biased self-promotion: as a contributing editor to the *San Francisco Wave* in 1897, Norris had more than just a passing interest in promoting San Francisco as a haven for human drama and the production of literary art. In fact, four months prior to publishing "The House with the Blinds," Norris had written a brief essay for *The Wave* entitled "An Opening for Novelists: Great Opportunities for Fiction Writers in San Francisco." In this essay Norris develops in greater detail the theme he would repeat in the opening paragraph of "The House with the Blinds." Although it would be helpful, for sure, if Norris would tell us exactly why San Francisco is a great story city, but Nashville is not, he stops short of doing so. He does tell us that it has nothing to do with the relative age, geographical location, social atmosphere, beauty, or size of the city. It must merely be a place where it is evident that "Things Can Happen." And, of course, Norris affirms for us, things can

certainly happen in San Francisco, as even a brief tour through the various neighborhoods and landmarks of the city will reveal. Norris does note that San Francisco is not yet at the stage of its growth as a city to provide fodder for the novelist, but for the short story writer, San Francisco merely awaits its literary champion, and Norris makes a plea for such a champion when he writes:

Where is the man that shall get at the heart of us, the blood and bones and fiber of us, that shall go a-gunning for stories up and down our streets and into our houses and parlors and lodging houses and saloons and dives and along our wharves and into our theaters; yes, and into the secretest chambers of our homes as well as our hearts?<sup>7</sup>

This plea is telling, for not only did Norris, in effect, set out to answer his own call, but in a short story such as "The House with the Blinds," Norris explores the very areas he mentions in his list, including, notably, the "secretest chambers of our homes," for the murdered man in his story is discovered stuffed inside a closet, and, at the close of the story, the narrator is left wondering what use the new tenants of the house have found for that same closet.

In addition to these observations, there may yet be additional significance to Norris's "House with the Blinds"; however, we must travel back several more months in time, to December of 1896, when Norris published another brief essay in the *Wave* entitled "The Modern Short Story."<sup>8</sup> Brief as it is, in its three pages we get the bulk of what Norris had to say about what it means to write short stories in the late nineteenth century. He begins by making a distinction between two types of short stories. One type has its roots in the early nineteenth century, and is, in effect, nothing more than a miniature novel, complete with "introduction, plot, complication, development of character and the like—every characteristic in fact but that of length." But in his own time, Norris tells us, a second type of short story has emerged. Under pressure from a magazine culture that provides less and less space for the short story writer to ply his or her trade, a short story form has developed that is both shorter in length, and is shorn of standard novelistic conventions. Norris notes that the short story "has become shorter and shorter from year to year, until from being a shorter form of novel of

incidents and episodes, it has been reduced in some cases to the relation of a single incident by itself, concise, pungent, direct as a blow." In a story such as this, the burden placed on the artist is great. "The author," Norris writes, "must devise or discover a single scene, a bit, an episode so full of meaning, so dramatic, so tremendously significant that it suggests to the mind of the reader an entire volume of explanatory matter. The reader must not only read between the lines, but between the very words. And all this must be accomplished within the compass of, at the very most, thirty-five hundred words." In general, this seems to be the strategy Norris adopted in many of his *Wave* stories, and was used with curious effect in stories such as "Little Dramas of the Curbstone," "The Third Circle," and "The House with the Blinds." Because of their brevity and lack of what Norris considers novelistic conventions of development, their suggestive power is heightened, and the reader is asked to fill in some of the missing elements by re-creating the story behind the story, or by simply being struck by the significance of the dramatic moment being described.

Norris concludes his discussion of the modern short story by offering his thoughts on the importance of the final paragraph of a short story. Here is what Norris writes:

One of the most fetching "tricks" of the short story writer is his handling of the very last paragraph or sentence of his story. By its very position the last sentence of a tale gathers the enormous emphasis it may possess. The reader will invariably consider the last sentence with great seriousness, weighing every word with the greatest attention and earnestness. Many short story writers who are clever enough to realize this weakness—if it be a weakness—on the part of their public, are also clever enough to take advantage of it, by withholding the real point and meaning of their story until the last sentence or paragraph is reached, then suddenly unfolding it in a few brief words, as one might suddenly unravel an apparently hopeless tangle of skeins with a few deft turns of the wrist. This is trickery of course, but it is very clever trickery, since it discloses the whole purport of the story in a single instant, and the reader receives the accumulated effect of the preceding

pages with the suddenness and force of a mild electric shock.

When Norris wrote these lines, he had in mind a few of the productions of Richard Harding Davis and Anthony Hope, and Norris himself practiced what he preached in some of his *Wave* stories, such as "The Third Circle." But it was, of course, Porter, under the pseudonym of O. Henry, who would try to perfect the art of the well-crafted ending filled with deft turns of the wrist. Was Porter aware of Norris's commentary on the "Modern Short Story"? It's entirely possible, though I don't know. What we do know for sure is that Norris the short story writer (as opposed to Norris the novelist) played at least a small role in the development of the American short story in the early 20th-century, and we can credit Norris with providing the inspiration for what is arguably Porter's single greatest story, "A Municipal Report."

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Pattee as quoted in Harold Bloom, ed., *O. Henry: Comprehensive Research and Study Guide* (New York: Chelsea House, 1999), 34.

<sup>2</sup>Norris quoted by O. Henry as an epigraph to "A Municipal Report" (reprinted in *Stories of the Old South*, ed. Ben Forkner and Patrick Samway [New York: Penguin, 1989], 198-211). All pages references to this story by O. Henry will be to this edition. O. Henry slightly misquotes Norris, but this is probably further evidence for the fact that O. Henry was using a review of Norris's *The Third Circle* as the source of his epigraph, rather than a copy of Norris's story itself.

<sup>3</sup>All references to "The House with the Blinds" are to *The Apprenticeship Writings of Frank Norris, 1896-1898*, ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., and Douglas K. Burgess (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1996), vol. 2, 91-97.

<sup>4</sup>This particular review is reprinted in *Frank Norris: The Critical Reception*, ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., and Katherine Knight (New York: Burt Franklin, 1981), 327-30. This connection between the *Putnam's* review and O. Henry's story is also noted by Walter Evans in "'A Municipal Report': O. Henry and Postmodernism," *Tennessee Studies in Literature*, 26 (1981), 101-116. See 115, n. 22.

<sup>5</sup>This letter from O. Henry to Griffith is reprinted as part of a brief retrospective written by Griffith fifteen years after O. Henry's death: "O. Henry at Work and Play," *Dearborn Independent*, 14 November 1925, 4-5, 24. In this article, Griffith notes that the letter quoted was undated. Late 1909 seems the most likely choice, for it had to have been written after the *Putnam's* review, but before Porter's story appeared in print. Curiously, an anonymous article appeared seven years earlier

in June 1918 entitled "How O. Henry's Greatest Story Came to be Written," *Current Opinion*, 64 (1918), 421. The anonymous journalist claims that the letter was written in 1908, but this must be inaccurate, for the *Putnam's* review appeared in August 1909.

<sup>6</sup>C. Alphonso Smith *O. Henry Biography* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1916), 231.

<sup>7</sup>Reprinted in *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, ed. Donald Pizer (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), 28-30.

<sup>8</sup>Reprinted in *The Literary Criticism of Frank Norris*, 48-50. For the record, although this essay is included in Pizer's volume of Norris's essays, "The Modern Short Story" is listed by Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., as a dubious attribution or misattribution in *Frank Norris: A Descriptive Bibliography* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1992), 279. The reason for McElrath's designation seems to be based on the fact that the article was unsigned. The style of the piece (particularly the use of quote marks for emphasis and the dramatic use of asyndeton) and the types of literary references that appear in the piece suggest that Norris is a likely candidate for having written the article. I do not know upon what basis Pizer determined that the piece was indeed by Norris.

## Hamlin Garland's Relationship with Frank Norris

Jesse S. Crisler

Brigham Young University

On 23 April 1931, a youthful Franklin Dickerson Walker, then a doctoral candidate at the University of California at Berkeley where for his dissertation topic he had chosen to write a biography of one of the university's favorite sons, Frank Norris, sent a lengthy letter to Hamlin Garland to request assistance with his research. After introducing himself and describing the nature of his project, he said,

I had hoped that in your "Roadside Meetings" you would say something of your friendship with Norris but I have found no comment on him there. . . . I understand from Mrs. Frank Preston, Frank Norris' widow[,] that he met you through the Hernes sometime in 1900 or 1901 and that he saw you frequently while he was working on "The Pit." . . . Perhaps you made some note about Norris at the time which you would let me use. At any rate, I should

very much appreciate a statement concerning your impressions of his personality and methods of writing together with any incidents which may occur to you in writing. . . . Did he ever say anything to you about his plans for "The Wolf" or any other books which he intended to write? What did you feel about his influence and future at that time?<sup>1</sup>

Walker's brash optimism went unanswered. Undeterred, the callow but persistent young scholar six months later wrote the esteemed but aging author a second letter, one which indicates that his experiences in research had taught him needed lessons about how to enlist aid from the great and the good, for this time, armed with the success of his by then accepted dissertation and able now to inform Garland that it was soon to be published by Doubleday, Doran, the successors of Norris's own publishers, Walker, rather than vaguely querying Garland for amorphous recollections, specifically sought information concerning Garland's purported review of *McTeague* (1899), a reference to which Walker, having done his homework, had discovered in *The Wave* and from which he now desired "to use a quotation" in his biography. Ever hopeful, Walker, now teaching in his first post in higher learning at a teachers college in San Diego, closed his second request with renewed sanguinity: "Any additional information which you care to give me about your personal contact with Norris will be greatly appreciated."<sup>2</sup>

On the face of it, one wonders why Garland had failed to respond to Walker's initial entreaty. Any number of explanations spring to mind, not the least of which might have been Garland's realization that, had he set himself resolutely to answer fully the questions Walker posed, he might well have written a sizeable chunk of Walker's own dissertation. A quickly drafted note from Garland in response to Walker's second petition, however, discloses not Garland's disdain for Walker's eagerness nor even his dismissal of it, but, rather, his involvement in his own publishing project: at the bottom of a circular issued by another publishing firm, Macmillan, hailing the recent appearance of his *Companions on the Trail* (1931), Garland scrawled, "You will find all I have written in 'Roadside Meetings.' I return to Hollywood in November," dispatching the circular forthwith to Walker from New York.<sup>3</sup>

Doubtless, receiving at long last a reply from Garland

related Walker, yet it must also have puzzled him, since it counseled him to check *Roadside Meetings* (1930) for Garland's musings on Norris, yet months earlier Walker had reported to Garland that his consultation of that very volume had yielded nothing whatsoever about Garland's relationship with Norris, whom Garland had not even met until some point after the period treated in the book. Given that the Macmillan circular refers not to Garland's first literary memoir, published in 1930, but to his just published second one, Garland's ambiguity seems easily put to rest. Alas, it is so only temporarily. Upon his return to California, Garland wrote a more formal letter to Walker in which he answered the latter's "request for material concerning Norris" with the troublesome statement that he had "put it all into *Roadside Meetings*, and *Roadside Companions*." Walker already knew that *Roadside Meetings* contained nothing about Norris; as for "*Roadside Companions*," no book by that title, either by Garland or anyone else, existed. Presumably, Walker must have eventually realized that Garland meant *Companions on the Trail* after all, and indeed that volume does include his remembrances of Norris.

In 1929 Garland, at nearly seventy, was still vigorously pursuing a career in the world of letters that for forty years had proved intellectually stimulating and financially lucrative. The next few years would see that career continue with the publication of four collections of memoirs based almost exclusively on lengthy diaries and notebooks kept for over a half-century. His recollection of Norris in *Companions* constitutes but one episode of many associations he chronicles concerning fellow writers. The bulk of that recollection is a six-page quotation cribbed in the main from an article Garland had written five months after Norris died, for the March 1903 number of *The Critic*.<sup>4</sup> Despite their length, Garland's comments qualify more as critique of Norris's best-known novels—*McTeague*, *The Octopus* (1901), and *The Pit* (1903)—than either as assessment of his personality or even evaluation of their friendship. As Walker's quotation of only two brief passages from them in his 1932 biography discloses, he inevitably realized to his own disappointment, that those passages comprised a meager harvest from what he hoped would prove a fertile Garland pasture.

Even so, Walker might have made more of Garland's remarks about Norris than he did. Certainly, he selected

interesting tidbits to quote, noting that Garland recalled Norris's build—"tall and slender"—his appearance—"prematurely graying hair and fine, candid, humorous glance"—the overall literary impression he made—"he looked the poet rather than the realistic novelist"—his confidence in argument—"He knew what he was talking about"—and his *joie de vivre*—"His face shone with roguery and good cheer. His entire manner was never coarse, and his jocular phrases were framed in unexpected ways. . . . He smoked his pipe and made merry and discussed everything . . . under the sun—and appeared quite at ease."<sup>5</sup> Tantalizing as such bon-bons are, however, they actually say little about the nature of the relationship Garland and Norris enjoyed. After mentioning, for example, that Edwin Markham in January 1900 encouraged Garland to visit Norris, noting that he "was a fine fellow. You should know him," Garland stated,

One day not long after this, as I was passing through the outer office of Doubleday & Page on Union Square, I saw a young man seated at a small desk. Doubleday who was with me touched the youth on the shoulder. "Frank Norris, you should know Hamlin Garland." As Norris rose and faced me I thought him one of the most attractive men I had ever met. . . . We had only a few moments' talk, but I carried away such report of him to my wife that she expressed a wish to know him.<sup>6</sup>

In a copy of *Blix* (1899) inscribed to him by Norris, Garland related the story of this portentous event as well but in more detail:

One day I went into the office of Doubleday, Page and Co[.] I saw Frank Norris sitting at a desk bent over some MS. I knew him but slightly[,] had met him once or twice[,] but I had just read "McTeague" and was powerfully moved by it. This must have been about New Years 1900. As I was about to pass Norris I stopped and shook hands and asked him for an autograph in "Blix." There was only this "sample copy" in the house and so he wrenched it from the shelf and put his name on it. This was the beginning of our more intimate friendship.<sup>7</sup>

One cannot fault Walker for not knowing what else Garland had written regarding what in *Companions* he erroneously characterized as his first encounter with

Norris, but one can rebuke him for not exploiting that encounter sufficiently, since not only does he omit the heart of Garland's remembrances, but he also confuses the already muddy particulars of his initial meeting with Norris when in his edition of Norris's letters published a quarter-century later he incorrectly asserted that Garland first met Norris not in the offices of the new firm of Doubleday, Page, or possibly even earlier, but at the home of Juliet Wilbor Tompkins, a mutual friend.<sup>8</sup> In *Companions* Garland assuredly does refer to a dinner Tompkins "arranged," but that was not their initial meeting.<sup>9</sup>

Still, the Tompkins dinner or at least Garland's remembrance of it should have afforded an opportunity which Walker missed entirely to interpret an astonishing reversal in Norris's admittedly naïve political thinking. In 1895 Norris, as special correspondent for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, traveled to South Africa, where, fired with righteously indignant zeal at the temerity of the Dutch who for centuries had prevented first natives and later immigrant English settlers from participating in government of their vast territory, he suited thought to deed by joining an ill-starred revolt of the British Uitlanders led by Leander Starr Jameson, a quasi-administrator in Mashonaland appointed by the wealthy and ambitious Cecil Rhodes. For his efforts Norris earned expulsion from the country (though he fared better than Jameson himself whom the British government imprisoned for fifteen months). Now, a scant five years later, Garland remembered that

At Juliet Wilbor Tompkins' home . . . I met both Frank Norris and Ernest Seton-Thompson. We had a joyful evening up to the moment when my wife unthinkingly touched on the justice of the Boer war. Nearly all of us were pro-Boer, and Norris, who had been in Africa at the time of the Jameson Raid, questioned the justice of England's rule, and this stirred Seton-Thompson's British blood. Filled with English imperialism, he defended the war in Africa with fiery eloquence. His black eyes glowed with menacing light, but Norris held his own with entire good humor.<sup>10</sup>

Norris could well have altered the reckless position he had adopted as an uninformed youth, true, but his consistent advocacy of "the indomitable Anglo-Saxon spirit" in his South Africa articles for the *Chronicle*, his

Cuban journalism, and his later popular essays effectively obviates that possibility, as does the recollection of his college roommate, Seymour Waterhouse, when in an interview Walker himself conducted on 5 June 1930 he averred that Norris "had no use for the Boers."<sup>11</sup> What is more likely is that Garland misconstrued what really was said that night in mid-January 1900. Regardless, Walker could have employed Garland's account as color for painting a picture of a more complicated Norris than the nauseatingly boyish figure his biography uniformly limns.

Nor could Walker have had access to Garland's original diaries which did not come to the Huntington Library until after his death in 1940, and thus Walker was not aware of Garland's further impressions that same evening of a man who would soon become his "intimate" friend. In his entry for 20 January 1900 Garland wrote that he and his wife Zulime "were greatly taken with Norris who is very handsome—almost the handsomest American author. A clean-cut, alert, manly type. We drew closer together by reason of this evening. He was admirable at all points," reflections that Garland inexplicably omitted in his later memoir.<sup>12</sup>

What he did not omit but what Walker did not include until he compiled his edition of Norris's letters in 1956 is a fairly full description of a subsequent dinner, this one held nearly two years later, on 15 December 1901, by Mrs. Katherine Corcoran Herne, wife of the recently deceased playwright and actor James A. Herne and herself another friend of Garland's. In *Companions* Garland recorded in detail a conversation he had at this dinner with Norris who revealed the plan for his wheat trilogy along with his admiration of Zola. To have eliminated Norris's declaration of his appreciation of Zola after he had written *The Octopus* (1901), a novel indebted on more than one level to his French mentor, seems rather odd, since Walker took great pains in his biography to trace Zola's influence on Norris. To have excluded as well Garland's almost adoring characterization of Norris likewise seems careless:

a stunning fellow—an author who does not personally disappoint his admirers. He is perilously handsome, tall and straight, with keen brown eyes and beautifully modeled features. His face is as smooth as that of a boy of twenty, but his hair is almost white. I have never known a more engaging writer. He is a poet in

appearance but a close observer and a realist in his fiction. We had a lively evening together, really got at each other's prejudices as well as enthusiasms. He seems confident of his future, as well he may be, for his work is in demand and his mind in a glow of creative energy. I know of no one for whom I can more unhesitatingly predict a noble career.<sup>13</sup>

Five days later, as recorded in his diary, Garland and his wife dined with the Norrises again, and when Norris fell to talking about his consuming work on his trilogy, Garland predictably confided, "I bantered him a little on his debt to Zola in 'The Octopus,'" but declared Norris "a fine fellow" who "grows in interest and charm."<sup>14</sup> Again, Walker had no access to Garland's more private notes, but their unavailability to him hardly excuses his omission from his biography of Norris's reference to Zola in Garland's published memoir.

Garland mentioned Norris thrice more in *Companions*, but Walker declined to acknowledge this. Dating his observation 17 January 1902, Garland described Norris once again, injecting the subtlest tinge of jealousy into his paeon, a caprice which Walker might easily have broadened as an intimation of the complexities attending the burgeoning friendship between the two men:

Frank Norris looking very handsome—but not as strong and ruddy as he should be—lunched with me at the club, and as we walked away up the street together, I found myself quite overshadowed by his graceful figure and pale, clear-cut features. He was wearing a wide hat and his wonderful eyes glowed beneath its rim with dusky fire. He is the most impressive of all our young writers. There is something fine and sweet and boyish about him. He is in the full tide of his powers and all his friends predict a swift success.<sup>15</sup>

Garland's original diary entry for this date likewise contains the vaguest envy of Norris while imparting the information that that same evening he and Zulime once again dined with the Norrises, "a very quiet family dinner," at which Norris "pleased" him:

More than ever—there was something fine and sweet and boyish about him and his gay wife and bright home made a most delightful impression on us both.—He was full of big



plans for future books. He is in a full tide of his powers and so handsome and confident that there can be no question of his success. His wife had given him a very handsome desk for a Christmas present and he was filled with pride and joy in it.

But six weeks later on 5 March, according to his diary, though Garland mistakenly recorded 26 February in *Companions*, his nascent envy had disappeared as Garland once again launched a by now familiar encomium of all things Norris:

My wife and I had much pleasure to-day . . . in helping Jeanette [*sic*] Norris celebrate her husband's birthday. Three weeks ago she gave birth to a little Jeanette [*sic*—yet here she was, sitting at the head of her table, gay and blooming. Such maternity seems a rational part of life. She had bought a beautiful new desk for Frank and had photographed him seated proudly before it. We claimed (and obtained) a copy of this picture as a souvenir of the dinner. "Life is coming to harvest with Norris," I said to my wife as we came away. "He deserves all that has come or may come to enrich him."<sup>16</sup>

Finally, Garland prefaced the cribbed *Critic* article in *Companions* with a lament for the death of his young friend "in the full flush of his joyous success, in the glow of his domestic happiness and the pride of his paternity." Searching for someone or something to blame for this unexpected turn of events, Garland even suggested that the fault may have lain with Norris's own doctor: "Nothing of late has so stirred me and grieved me. It seems some criminal neglect must have manifested itself. Some physician must have blundered. I want to accuse some one responsible. "See what an irreparable injury to American literature you have wrought""<sup>17</sup> In an entry in his unpublished "Literary Notes," dated 27 October 1902, the day he learned Norris had died, Garland had earlier juxtaposed the joint themes of Norris's promise and the gross inequity of his death:

Word has just come that this famous young genius—this tender and winsome husband—this superb young man[,] my friend[,] my lover is dead. I cannot believe it. I seem to see his big dark eyes and hear his quaint speech—he calls me by my full name—boyishly yet

with a sweet touch of respect as if to express the ten years of seniority I bear.

He was one of the most loveable and one of the most interesting men I have ever known. He was not a brother and yet he filled a large part in my life and thought.

With him I associate a hundred quaint and beautiful scenes. I see him walking down the street radiant, his handsome head as graceful as a flower, his skin as fair as a girls [*sic*], his eyes deep and yet keen. He was a perpetual delight to me. He never palled in my eye or ear or sense. I could be with him always and never grow weary.—

And to think of the little flat and the new desk and the baby on the fire escape—is to weep for the little wife who must bear this awful—this remorseless blow.—

We could not well spare this mind and personality out of our life and literature—but it is gone!—And yet in another sense it is not lost. No one who knew Frank Norris will ever forget him. His life was so sweet and so forceful. I come back again and again to his beauty which was not merely physical. His flesh was fine, his nerves keenly tempered but his spirit was more beautiful than his body and his intellect so alert that every atom of his material self seemed alive—no cell was dormant.

He stood tall—and he looked widely on the world. For one so young his view of social maturity and forces was singularly large—almost epic. He was the kind of man whose hidden self—inarticulate so far as speech is concerned—becomes suddenly and surprisingly large simple and passionate as he begins to write. He was a man of great laughter—of that pithy speech—humorous almost always deeply sympathetic—

And now in the midst of his splendid plans which he talked to me so freely and with such quiet certainty of purpose are broken as a bubble breaks—

My heart aches—the world at the moment seems of little use. Why do we strive and plan when such strange forces lie in wait to swallow us—The papers are full of the doings of petty

and pilfering men—men who imitate and putter and wreck human hearts—while this brave, beautiful spirit is blown out as a candle by a chill wind.—

There is not a man in all American letters whose death could so affect me—not even Howells for his work is nearly done. Frank Norris was of my own generation. His work was broadening in scope and deepening in power. He had a beautiful young wife—a little laughing babe—he had a thousand friends—and a million readers—He was so peculiarly happy—so capable of enjoying the big world and life.

I come back to the utter senselessness—the severity—the unalleviated devilishness of his taking off. There is no comfort for me—and I dare not attempt to send a word of comfort to his wife. What voice can reach her now that his is silenced—only one the cooing cry of her babe. Perhaps little Jennette [*sic*] may save her from madness. Nothing else can.<sup>18</sup>

As already noted, Walker was not privy to such personal reminiscences of Garland's, but Garland himself had referred Walker to *Companions* in which his distress, though much truncated from this lyrical eulogium in 1902 for a man whose comparative youth allowed Garland to view him almost as a younger brother, remains moving nonetheless. It also demonstrates rather dramatically the considerable depth of his affection, the consequences of which Walker unaccountably sidesteps. Nor did Garland confine his sorrow to *Companions*. A decade earlier in 1921 he had voiced similar regrets in *A Daughter of the Middle Border*, a source eminently available to Walker and one with which he ought to have been familiar: it had, after all, earned Garland a Pulitzer Prize the next year. Strangely enough, however, Walker forfeited yet another chance to augment his study of Norris by highlighting the stated regard in which at least one of his contemporaries held him:

In the midst of this period of hard work on *Hesper*, news of the death of Frank Norris came to me. Frank Norris the most valiant, the happiest, the handsomest of all my fellow craftsmen. Nothing more shocking, more insensate than the destruction of this glorious

young fictionist had come to my literary circle, for he was aglow with a husband's happiness, gay with the pride of paternity, and in the full spring-tide of his powers. His going left us all poorer and took from American literature one of its strongest young writers.<sup>19</sup>

But, in defense of Walker, one must in fairness consider how much about a subject's life, even a life as brief as Norris's, a biographer should be expected to include in a relatively short treatment. Having recently completed with Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., the writing of our own biography of that same subject, I realize very well that spatial exigencies consistently affect both what must necessarily be inserted and what must lamentably be excluded. Still, that Walker besought Garland on two occasions for his memories of Norris and that his biography does contain enough about their association to more than whet the appetite of the interested student of Norris's life and art force the conclusion that neither Walker nor subsequent biographers, possibly even McElrath and I, have explored that association adequately. And what, besides Garland's printed recollections in *Companions*, *A Daughter of the Middle Border*, and the *Critic* piece, and his unpublished notes, exists to assist scholars in probing the precise nature of the two writers' relationship? First is material to which Walker had access, a category including, for instance, his own interviews with Norris's widow, then Mrs. Jeannette Preston. Confirming Garland's opinion of Norris, whom she said Garland "always . . . liked [the] looks" of, Jeannette told Walker on 8 May 1930 that Norris "was particularly fond of Hamlin Garland," adding a week later that Norris "admired" Garland "very much," but Walker chose not to voice that admiration.<sup>20</sup> Other information available to Walker may be seen in Norris's references to Garland in print. In "New York as a Literary Center" Norris cited Garland, a man "of large caliber," as one of several of his contemporaries, such as Twain, James, and Frederic, who repeatedly eschewed making New York their permanent residence,<sup>21</sup> while later in "Back to Woods and Fields" Norris observed that differing temperaments and "ideals" forever prevented Garland and other writers—Wharton, for example—from being subsumed in a single American "'school'" of writing.<sup>22</sup> Walker could easily have capitalized on either or both of these opinions to profitable purpose.

Material surfacing only after the appearance of Walker's biography constitutes a second, larger category. While no letters from Garland to Norris exist, extant are seven letters from Norris to Garland and one to Zulime, in Norris Studies a veritable treasure trove—indeed, more to Garland survive than to any other correspondent of Norris's save his British publisher Grant Richards and his exuberant friend and worshipful fan Isaac F. Marcossou. These letters to Garland offer a rich vein of biographical ore to be mined alongside Garland's diary entries, many of which furnish a useful context for some of these letters, as does one other letter to his mother-in-law, Carolina Virginia Williamson Black, in which Norris in early 1902 informed her that Jeannette and he "have made some very dear friends of late,—Hamlin Garland, and his wife."<sup>23</sup> At about this same time, on 17 December 1901, in a letter to a good friend from his college days, Gelett Burgess, Norris confirmed that the growing friendship between the Garlands and the Norrises was fast becoming a regular feature of their social life: "Lloyd Osbourne is to dine with us Thursday night also Juliet Wilbor Tompkins and Hamlin Garland and his wife. Aint [*sic*] we dead swell."<sup>24</sup> In his diary on 20 December 1901, Garland added the painter Frederic Remington to this list of guests and provided further particulars of the evening: "Remington Norris [*sic*]. We dined with the Norris[es]. A group of western adventurers, all of us. Norris grows in interest and charm. A fine fellow." Norris also inscribed copies of *The Octopus* and *Blix* to Garland as well as the photograph taken at the desk Jeannette had given him for his birthday in 1902. Years later, in 1914 when Garland was reading *Vandover and the Brute*, which had appeared only three weeks earlier, he wrote to Charles G. Norris on 6 April to request his brother's "autograph" for his Chicago club, since, "after all, Frank was more or less a Chicago man," betokening, no surprise, that Garland still remembered Norris with fondness.<sup>25</sup>

For his part, Garland presented Norris with inscribed copies of three of his works: *The Captain of the Gray-Horse Troop* (1902)—"We herewith add one more to Jeannette's text books. She will soon know all that Garland knows"—*Her Mountain Lover* (1901)—"To Mr. Frank Norris with the well-wishes of the author of *Her Mountain Lover*"—and *Prairie Folks* (1899)—"To Mr[.] Frank Norris Whose fidelity to the ways of Life I

like." Later Garland sent Jeannette a copy of *Hesper* (1903), the novel he was researching in Colorado when news of Norris's death reached him.<sup>26</sup> Besides his letter to Charles, Garland alluded to Norris at least three more times in letters written after Norris's death: in 1904 to Dreiser when he compared *Sister Carrie* (1900) favorably to *McTeague*, "which I vastly admired"; in 1934 to Henry Carr, a Los Angeles-based journalist, when he added Norris to a list of writers "who have made so fine a beginning" toward a genuine "literature" of California; and in 1938 to Herbert Putnam, librarian of the Library of Congress, to which he was contemplating presenting his literary archive including his quite "saleable" Norris letters, an indication of the value he placed on Norris's literary artifacts.<sup>27</sup>

Two final documents survive. Possibly the most significant piece of information to the would-be literary and biographical interpreter of this multilayered relationship is the first. In his diary on 28 February 1899 Garland remarked that, having left New York by train for Chicago, he passed part of the tedious leg to Syracuse by reading "all the way . . . in a long novel 'McTeague'" which he judged "a fine study of the squalid but not altogether sordid life of San Francisco." His analysis of *McTeague* waxed both more extensive and more pointed on the back flyleaf of his copy of the novel:

A tragic story—wonderfully well imagined. The flux and flow of a great city is set forth with grim and unrelenting art. It would be difficult to name a more convincing study of the inhabitants of the sordid home on Polk Street. The style most admirable in its simplicity. The chase is a little too much. A duel to the death would have been logical—the bursting canteen, canary bird and hand-cuffs are a little too much.

But, withal, he still found it "a strong tragic story."<sup>28</sup> The last document is a letter from Garland published by *The Critic* in December 1902, two months before Garland's formal assessment of Norris's work ran in that same journal:

He was the handsomest, bravest, brightest man of letters I ever knew. He looked at things American in a large way, and his work was sincere and very strong. And yet great as 'The Octopus' and 'The Pit' are, they were only the

first fruits of a tremendous creative energy. But after all is said, I come back to the keen sorrow that seizes me as I remember his face, beautiful in its cheery, blithe fashion as Edwin Booth's was in its somber fashion. Norris was to me one of the most enviable of all the men I knew. . . . His winning personality captivated everyone who chanced to meet him. His going is a great loss to American literature. He was a man of blameless life, high ideals and great achievement.<sup>29</sup>

As with other material relating to the Norris-Garland relationship, a little more diligence by Walker might well have unearthed this remaining unpolished gem.

But even a thorough investigation of all this material—what Walker knew, what he used, what else he might have perceived, and especially what he could not then have apprehended but what scholars can now grasp—probably terminates at the same conclusion Walker should have reached and at which Garland himself definitely did arrive. At the close of the *Critic* article as reprinted in *Companions*, Garland appended, "I feel no inclination to change the broad outlines of this estimate now, thirty years later."<sup>30</sup> Obviously, Garland meant what he said there, but only an intensive examination of what else he had written prior to this final appraisal as well as other clues to the mutual esteem existing between Garland and Norris, as evidenced in their letters and inscriptions, in Norris's published references to Garland, in Garland's diary entries, and in Jeannette's recollections, reveals substantively how fully he meant it.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Franklin Dickerson Walker Collection (FDW), The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>2</sup>5 October 1931, FDW.

<sup>3</sup>Undated, FDW.

<sup>4</sup>"The Work of Frank Norris," *The Critic*, 42 (March 1903), 216-18.

<sup>5</sup>*Frank Norris: A Biography* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, 1932), 268, 282.

<sup>6</sup>Hamlin Garland, *Companions on the Trail: A Literary Chronicle* (New York: Macmillan, 1931), 10.

<sup>7</sup>J. Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

<sup>8</sup>*The Letters of Frank Norris* (San Francisco: Book Club of California, 1956), 83.

<sup>9</sup>*Companions*, 10.

<sup>10</sup>*Companions*, 11.

<sup>11</sup>FDW.

<sup>12</sup>Garland's diary, Manuscript Collection, Huntington Library, Pasadena, California.

<sup>13</sup>*Companions*, 103-4.

<sup>14</sup>20 December 1901, Garland's diary.

<sup>15</sup>*Companions*, 117.

<sup>16</sup>*Companions*, 126-27.

<sup>17</sup>*Companions*, 166.

<sup>18</sup>"Death of Frank Norris Oct. 27. '02" in "Literary Notes," 287-291; unpublished journal in Garland Papers, Doheny Library, University of Southern California.

<sup>19</sup>*A Daughter of the Middle Border* (New York: Macmillan, 1921), 262.

<sup>20</sup>8 and 16 May 1930, FDW.

<sup>21</sup>"New York as a Literary Center," *The Responsibilities of the Novelist and Other Literary Essays* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1903), 95-99.

<sup>22</sup>"Back to Woods and Fields," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 15 February 1902: 10.

<sup>23</sup>Jesse S. Crisler, ed. *Frank Norris: Collected Letters* (San Francisco: Book Club of California, 1986), 183.

<sup>24</sup>*Frank Norris: Collected Letters*, 177.

<sup>25</sup>Norris's letters to Garland, the two inscribed books, and the inscribed photograph are all part of the Garland Papers, Doheny Library, and have all been published in *Frank Norris: Collected Letters*; Garland's letters to Charles Norris are also part of this collection.

<sup>26</sup>Frank Norris Collection, The Bancroft Library.

<sup>27</sup>Keith Newlin and Joseph B. McCullough, eds., *Selected Letters of Hamlin Garland* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 186, 374, 411.

<sup>28</sup>Garland Papers, Doheny Library.

<sup>29</sup>*The Critic*, 41 (December 1902), 537.

<sup>30</sup>*Companions*, 171.

"The Wife of Chino": A Reconsideration of Frank Norris's Narrative Technique  
Joseph R. McElrath, Jr.  
Florida State University

Frank Norris's status in American cultural history results from his having measured up to several criteria, some of which have been in place since the late nineteenth century, while others have since come and gone, and sometimes come again, as notions of what's important have changed. For example, early in the twentieth century, when Norris first enjoyed notoriety as Zola's disciple, no one cared about his attitudes toward

multiple national, ethnic, and racial groups. This was so, evidently, because his own points of view on types of humanity merely reflected those of both his book-buying contemporaries and like-minded critics. By the 1960s, however, his readership had changed, and he was receiving a good deal of attention, and censure, for his often unflattering representations of minorities. Later, with the advent of the race-class-gender vogue, Norris again served as a whipping-boy because of his biases—though he has not regained his high visibility of the 1960s as a virulent racist.

It now appears that all that is needful has been said about his being a racist—save, I suggest, for a few qualifications or finer measurements.

For example, Norris in *McTeague* could blithely fashion a statement such as “the freshly blackened cook stove glowed like a negro’s hide”; but, as though this were merely a piquant figure of speech and really nothing more, he enthusiastically proclaimed his admiration for Booker T. Washington on another occasion.<sup>1</sup> Like inconsistencies calling into question the quality and depth of his bigotry abound in his canon. San Francisco’s Chinatown was, in a series of short stories, a lurid netherworld, a noisome swamp populated by opium dealers, white slaves, and hatchet-wielding members of rival tongs; but it was also the realm of exotic, kaleidoscopically colorful beauty that he celebrated in his novel *Blix*. Too, in *Moran of the Lady Letty* he describes Mongolians in simian terms; yet, in the short story “The Third Circle,” the Chinese character he gives the most attention attractively displays a degree of sophistication that makes the Anglo-American hero of the tale sound and look like a chump, if not a chimp. One sees the arch-racist display like contradictory behavior when it comes to characters of Iberian ancestry. In *The Octopus* the Portuguese- and Spanish-American field hands reveal the sanguinary consequences of hot Latin bloodlines; Father Sarria, however, brings to mind the Good Shepherd as he ministers to his flock. A similar ambivalence is seen in another way when one focuses on the stereotypical representations of German and Polish Jews in Norris’s writings; for, the Norris biographer cannot neglect to note that for many years this apparent anti-semitic counted among his friendships those with Myron Wolf, Maurice Samuels, Isaac Marcossou, and both Ernest and Jessica Peixotto. In *McTeague* Marcus Schouler threatens

Zerkow with physical violence, declaring “I’ll do for you myself, you dirty Jew.”<sup>2</sup> But, while he never had a good word to say about the Boers, there not a hint amidst the testimonies of those who knew him that Norris ever personally abused members of any minority, nor even used such demeaning epithets when interacting with them.<sup>3</sup>

But my interest here is not in Norris’s racism per se. Rather, much more neglected and thus worthy of greater attention is what may initially appear a far-distant topic, Norris’s narrative technique. The two subjects do overlap, though. That racism manifests itself in his writings does inevitably involve recognition of not only *what* is communicated to the reader but *how*. Further, there is the question of *whose* racism is given exposition at particular moments. Is it Norris’s or just that of one of his characters? For example, an author such as Norris is not necessarily implicated as one of his characters directs a slur at men and women of Latin extraction. When, in *The Octopus*, Annixter asks Father Sarria about one of his flock—“How is that greaser of yours up on Osterman’s stock range?”—the direct discourse method employed by Norris tells us only *what* Annixter wondered and *how* he asked about the man he next characterizes as a “lazy, cattle-stealing, knife-in-his-boot Dago.”<sup>4</sup> The same is true when Presley seeks to warn Annixter about the violence of which his ranch superintendent Delaney is capable. Presley “began to explain the danger of [dealing with the superintendent]. Delaney had once knifed a greaser in the Panamint country. He was known as a ‘bad man.’”<sup>5</sup> Here Norris’s use of the indirect discourse method tells us only that Presley, too, thinks the same way about members of the same Latin underclass, “greasers” or “dagos.” In both kinds of communication—direct and indirect discourse—there is no ambiguity possible. One cannot conclude that Norris’s attitude is in harmony with Annixter’s and Presley’s—unless Norris complements the slurs in his own representations of “dagos” or “greasers” or indicates in his own voice that he too shares Annixter’s and Presley’s bias. And, in fact, he does both. Referring to the man about whom Annixter has enquired, Norris explains to the reader, “This particular greaser was the laziest, the dirtiest, the most worthless of the lot.” But this is by way of preface to elevating another member of the same racial group, Father Sarria: writes Norris,

"But in Sarria's mind the lout was an object of affection, sincere, unquestioning. Thrice a week the priest, with a basket of provisions, . . . toiled over the interminable stretch of country between the Mission and his cabin. Of late, during the rascal's sickness, these visits had become almost daily."<sup>6</sup>

Yes, Norris in 1901 was as much a racist as the majority of his readers. There's no denying that. But his inconsistent behavior is seen as well in his treatment of his own kind. Describable as a white supremacist who ever extolled the evolutionary superiority of those sharing Anglo-Saxon and related ancestries, Norris is as ambivalent when characterizing members of his own racial group in negative terms. Often overlooked has been the fact that the most villainous of the large cast of characters in his canon are the restless, self-centered and aggressively acquisitive Anglo-Americans as predatory as Vikings, for example, Charlie Geary in *Vandover and the Brute*, Shelgrim in *The Octopus*, and Curtis Jadwin in *The Pit*. This he makes clear in his representations of their actions, as well as through direct discourse, indirect discourse, and commentaries of his own.

When making precise measurements of this racist, however, there is the use of another narrative convention to be taken into account, and it is one that has received surprisingly little attention given two facts. The first is that it was employed regularly by French novelists Norris is known to have read and admired: Balzac, Stendahl, Flaubert, and Zola. The second is that the narrative technique that they used was not unfamiliar to Norris's fellow American authors, nor to those of succeeding generations down to the present, as may be seen in Dennis Lehane's 2001 novel *Mystic River*. This is the mode of free indirect discourse, *le style indirect libre*, the essential of which is that the narrator writing in the third-person singular about a character's behavior, thoughts, and statements suddenly shifts the point of view from his own to that of the character. The narrator continues to use the third-person singular, as though he is still giving his own take on the situation, and it may initially appear that the narrator has become an intrusive one offering an interpretation to the reader, as Hawthorne, for example, was wont to do. But, in fact, he is instead articulating what the character is thinking—free indirect discourse making available the same information that indirect discourse does, but without the presence of the markers customarily employed to

indicate who is thinking what, for example, as with the phrases "she said to herself," "it suddenly occurred to him that", or "he now understood that."

For example, free indirect discourse is not to be observed in this passage from *McTeague*:

The dentist went away from his bootless visit to his wife shaking with rage, hating her with all the strength of a crude and primitive nature. He clenched his fists till his knuckles whitened, his teeth ground furiously upon one another.

"Ah, if I had hold of you once, I'd make you dance. She had five thousand dollars in that room, while I stood there, not twenty feet away, and told her I was starving, and she wouldn't give me a dime to get a cup of coffee with, not a dime to get a cup of coffee. Oh, if I once get my hands on you!" His wrath strangled him. He clutched at the darkness in front of him, his breath fairly whistled between his teeth.<sup>7</sup>

But the same cannot be said about the following paragraph, in which Mac's violent fantasy is rendered in like terms without the quotation marks identifying direct discourse or a marker signifying indirect.

His hatred of Trina increased from day to day. *He'd make her dance yet. Wait only till he got his hands upon her. She'd let him starve, would she? She'd turn him out of doors while she hid her five thousand dollars in the bottom of her trunk. Aha, he would see about that someday. She couldn't make small of him. Ah, no. She'd dance all right—all right.* McTeague was not an imaginative man by nature, but he would lie awake nights, his clumsy wits galloping and frisking under the last of the alcohol, and fancy himself thrashing his wife, till a sudden frenzy of rage would overcome him, and he would shake all over, rolling upon the bed and biting the mattress [*italics added*].<sup>8</sup>

Yes, interpretation is involved, and opinions as to when Norris is utilizing free indirect discourse may vary, but recognition of its use is all-important. It can make a dramatic difference in interpretation when one is analyzing the major works, as well as less familiar pieces that perforce loom large in any study of Norris's racism, such as the short story "The Wife of Chino."

"The Wife" takes our attention once more back to

Latin Californians but, in fact, the primary subject matter dealt with thematically is not race but as important a one for latter-day Victorians, sexual ethics. The original title in manuscript was not "The Wife of Chino" but "The Wife of Uriah,"<sup>9</sup> and this was the consequence of a project that one of Norris's surviving notes at the Bancroft Library indicates he planned, the rewriting of biblical stories—in this case that of King David's lust for Bathsheeba and his arranging the death of her husband, Uriah, so that he might enjoy her favors. Perhaps Norris also recognized in the Old Testament tale that Bathsheeba's behavior was calculated to effect a seduction of David. Thus, in "The Wife," the engineer Lockwood is found in Placer County, California, overseeing the operations of a gold mine like the Big Dipper of *McTeague* fame. The only female at the mine is the flirtatious wife of one of Lockwood's shift-bosses, Chino Zavalla; and as time passes in this isolated realm of the lower Sierras, this sturdy and vigorous Anglo-American hero becomes increasingly susceptible to the charms of Felice Zavalla, who waxes more and more coquettish as his arousal keeps pace. When it appears that Lockwood has deliberately caused her husband's death by having him make a delivery of gold ingots to the town of Iowa Hill at the same time that a ruthless bandit is in the vicinity, the result is not only an evocation of the King David story in II Samuel but the siren's declaration that she is his. Race, then, suddenly leaps to the surface as Lockwood experiences repulsion rather than attraction. As the Anglo-Saxon (who would never stoop to such treachery) faces the Latina (who admires him for the flattering lengths she thinks he went to have her), she—we are told—stands revealed for the vile creature she is and so does "the baseness of her tribe, all the degraded savagery of a degenerate race."<sup>10</sup> That is, the explanation proffered for the depth of her degeneracy is racial: Felice is, Norris told the reader early in the story, "Mexican-Spanish."<sup>11</sup>

It is a curious moment in the tale. For, one wonders, what is one now to think of her husband, Chino? As with Father Sarria and the "greaser" he visits in *The Octopus*, Chino is from the same "tribe" as Felice, and yet there is nothing degenerate about him. Indeed, the reader knows the shift-boss as a model employee—about whom Norris had told us in his own voice that he is "absolutely trustworthy," "honest as the daylight," "discreet," and—most pertinent given the mythology of

Latinate inheritance—"cool-headed."<sup>12</sup> Else he would not have been given the charge of delivering the gold ingots to town. Did Norris forget what he had earlier written? Does the contradiction spell a degree of incompetence that was somehow overlooked not only by Norris but by his fastidious editor, Richard Watson Gilder, at *Century* magazine, and then by Charles G. Norris who included the story in *A Deal in Wheat and Other Stories of the New and Old West*?

The problem of intratextual confusion—or illogicality occasioned by a racist outburst at the close of the story—is, however, resolvable if one identifies *which* narrative conventions are employed in the passage in question and if one notes *when* Norris shifts from one to another as Felice is denounced. It reads thus, save for the bracketed numbers that have been inserted:

{1} She would have taken his hand, but Lockwood . . . was on his feet. It was as though a curtain that for months had hung between him and the blessed light of clear understanding had suddenly been rent in twain by her words. {2} The woman stood revealed. All the baseness of her tribe, all the degraded savagery of a degenerate race, all the capabilities for wrong, for sordid treachery, that lay dormant in her, leaped to life at this unguarded moment, and in that new light, that now at last she herself let in, stood pitilessly revealed, a loathsome thing, hateful as malevolence itself.

{3} "What," shouted Lockwood, "you think—that I—that I. . . oh-h, it's monstrous. . . ." {4} He could find no words to voice his loathing. Swiftly he turned away from her, the last spark of an evil love dying down forever in his breast.<sup>13</sup>

One notes in {1} that Norris, as omniscient author, begins the passage in the third-person singular, describing Lockwood's physical reaction to Felice's advance and then Lockwood's radically altered state of mind. What is missing in the next two sentences, the racist explanation of Felice's degeneracy {2}, is a clear indication of whose thoughts are given. Norris does not say that Lockwood is thinking this way, as he would had he opted for indirect discourse. Thus the question: who is having these racist thoughts? There is no question about what happens next {3}, though. Both the direct

discourse marker "shouted Lockwood" and quotation marks make clear who does what. Likewise, there is no mystery with which to deal in the last two sentences {4}. Norris ends the passage as he began it.

And so, one must make a choice: is the {2} unit one in which we find an intrusive commentary of the narrator, or is it instead a statement of Lockwood's new understanding of Felice rendered by means of free indirect discourse? As to which reading one should choose, it may be appropriate to do what Lockwood does not: recall Chino Zavalla's race, and then note that his Latin genes do not appear to dictate the degeneracy Lockwood sees in Felice.

There is another question to pose: why didn't Norris make this brief essay on narrative technique unnecessary by *telling* the reader that Lockwood thought to himself what he did? The answer is the same one that may be given should someone ask, why doesn't a novelist of a subsequent generation *tell* the reader when he or she has shifted to stream-of-consciousness narration? Or, why doesn't a playwright have a solitary character on the stage inform the audience that a soliloquy will now commence?

The function of all three literary conventions is the provision of a more immediate, direct experience of a character's thoughts than seems otherwise possible.

Flaubert and Zola realized the power inherent in free indirect discourse, and they acted accordingly. So did Frank Norris, again and again.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>*McTeague* (New York: Doubleday and McClure, 1899), 258; "Salt and Sincerity: II," *The Responsibilities of the Novelist and Other Literary Essays* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1903), 265.

<sup>2</sup>*McTeague*, 246.

<sup>3</sup>Such is the case in all published memoirs and in Franklin Walker's unpublished notes on interviews of Norris's contemporaries and his correspondence with them (Franklin Dickerson Walker Collection, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley).

<sup>4</sup>*The Octopus* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1901), 203.

<sup>5</sup>*The Octopus*, 245.

<sup>6</sup>*The Octopus*, 203.

<sup>7</sup>*McTeague*, 365-66.

<sup>8</sup>*McTeague*, 367-68. See also 369-70.

<sup>9</sup>The authorial replacement of the original title may be seen in the manuscript at the California State Library, Sacramento.

<sup>10</sup>"The Wife of Chino," *A Deal in Wheat and Other Stories of the New and Old West* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1903), 57.

<sup>11</sup>"The Wife of Chino," 32.

<sup>12</sup>"The Wife of Chino," 43.

<sup>13</sup>"The Wife of Chino," 57.



Frank Norris Studies

Editorial Offices

College of Arts and Sciences

110 Longmire

Florida State University

Tallahassee FL 32306-1280

(850) 645-1246

jmcelrath@english.fsu.edu